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DARDENNE, Luc**Abstract:** Reviews the motion picture "La Promesse," directed by Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne. INSET: FILMS WORTH SEEING.**Full Text Word Count:** 1314**ISSN:** 0028-6583**Accession Number:** 9705143276**Database:** Academic Search Premier**Section:** Books & The Arts
Stanley Kauffmann on Films**In a Cruel City**

Liege, in Belgium, is a heavily industrialized city. Seraing is a suburb, populated largely by Liege workers and--nowadays--ex-workers. Unemployment is high. As in other European industrial cities, many in that workforce are immigrants from all over the world. Also, as elsewhere, many of those immigrant workers were smuggled into the country and have no papers or, if they once were legal, have overstayed their permits. Thus they are easy pickings for local people who rip them off for lodging and various kinds of help.

This is the subject of *La Promesse* (New Yorker). Rather, this is the setting: the film concentrates intensely on a few people in that setting. *La Promesse*, though generated by social and economic conditions, is not a socioeconomic report: it's a moral drama, simple and deep. There's a familiar paradox: by concentrating realistically on people in a certain context, the film goes past the realistic into the thematic, the abstract.

This wonderful picture was made by two brothers, Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne, born in Seraing and now in their 40s, who have spent most of their twenty-year filmmaking career doing documentaries for European television. They have made two fiction features, unseen here; and with this third feature they step into the front rank of contemporary directors with social concerns, alongside Ken Loach and Mike Leigh.

The film begins with one person and follows him into a complex environment. Under the credits we hear

the thrum of a machine--no music. We see Igor, a nice-looking if impassive 15-year-old, pumping gas at a garage. An old woman drives up, and Igor fixes something under the hood of her car. She gets out to look at it, and he gets in to start the motor. He sees her wallet on the seat next to him and snatches it. When she notices that it's missing, she is especially upset because she has just picked up her pension. Igor advises her to go back and look in the parking lot--there are a lot of thieves about, he says.

Igor goes through the garage to the backyard where he takes out the money, then buries the wallet. In the garage his boss is about to teach him something about soldering when a car hoots outside. It's Igor's father calling for him early. The boss is vexed, but Igor leaves.

This brief sequence is like an overture to the whole film. Igor is brisk but polite, with the old woman, with his boss. His entire conduct, including his thievery and his composure at taking the old woman's pension, is serious, merely part of his behavior pattern. We have been given a brief but graphic sketch of Igor's mind and bearing--and more. This opening sets the Dardenne camera style. Urgent. Close. Igor moves quickly, and the camera follows him: his kinesis is the film's. No time is wasted on establishing shots or vistas. To be with Igor is to be in his tempo.

We now see where he got it: from his father, who is also the source of his ethics. Roger is a jowly, bespectacled working-class man, always driving or moving hurriedly. He owns and runs an old building split up into tiny apartments where immigrant workers live at high rents. Roger also does some transporting, some document-forging, other scams. His attitude is business-like, not consciously criminal: serious, brutal if necessary, but generally matter-of-fact. Igor clearly accepts this hustle--wed to the camera's hustle--as the order of the universe.

Then a young African woman, Assita, arrives from Burkina Faso with her infant son. She is there to join her husband, Hamidou, already resident in Roger's flophouse. She is tall, dignified, assured. As soon as she is with Hamidou, she gives their baby a ritual bath to protect him from the evil spirits in this place.

A few days later Hamidou is working on a scaffold on the building next door when the police arrive unexpectedly. Roger sends Igor to warn Hamidou to hide because the African's papers are no longer good. In his hurry Hamidou falls from the scaffold. He thinks he is dying. Igor finds him; and Hamidou makes him promise to take care of Assita and the child. That is the promise of the title.

Hamidou need not have died. Igor tries to halt the bleeding and get him to a hospital, but Roger comes along, stops the first aid, and refuses to take Hamidou to a hospital because of the legal trouble that would follow. He orders Igor to help him hide the African under some canvas. Later, he and Igor bury the corpse in cement. When Assita asks about Hamidou, Roger tells her that he has gone off for a while. Roger hatches a scheme to get her to return to Burkina Faso without Hamidou, but she refuses to leave. Igor begins to take steps to protect and help her. The gravamen of the picture is what happens to Igor because of his promise.

Why, suddenly, in this speedy, money-focused life, did this particular promise hold him? First, the shock of death. Second, Roger's behavior, which Igor understands--Roger is protecting himself and his family--but which nonetheless shocks him. Third, most important, Assita herself. This grave, composed woman refuses to waver in her duty; she will wait for her husband, no matter how harassed she is. She

relies on magic and juju--she consults an African seer to find out about Hamidou; she splits a live chicken to read its entrails--but rather than seeming barbaric, she appears to Igor to be in touch with larger matters than the daily frantic grubbings of himself and his father.

It is through her clarity that he first glimpses virtue. It is through her loyalty that he first understands selflessness. None of this is preached: it happens. Just as Igor snatched the wallet at the start without thinking it exceptional, so Assita cares for her son and is devoted to Hamidou--it is the order of things. The film ends with Igor touched more profoundly--too profoundly for surface emotion--than he suspected was possible for him.

Olivier Gourmet plays Roger with a dispatch that implies previous thought and resolve. Jeremie Renier as Igor is, because much younger, more remarkable. Helped by the brothers Dardenne, he metamorphoses from his father's son into a daring, somewhat frightened but courageous individual. The catalyst is Assita, played by Assita Ouedraogo. She is a schoolteacher in Burkina Faso and is not related to the filmmaker Idrissa Ouedraogo, though she has appeared in three of that master's films. She seems to assume nothing in her role: she simply endows the film with her beautiful presence.

The Dardenne brothers, as shown by their empathic casting, their very choice of theme, have confessed to a burden. They believe in hope. They insist that under the frenzy of our world, physical and moral, there is quiet. And that the quiet in one person, born to it in a remote place, can speak to the quiet that is buried in a native of noise. They insist with such subtle fervor that they induce us, too, to share that burden of hope.

FILMS WORTH SEEING

The Designated Mourner. Wallace Shawn's piece for three speakers who sit facing us, casually describing the end of civilization. A quasi-vernacular elegy, funny, frightening, lovely. The leading speaker is Mike Nichols, excellent. (Reviewed 3/24/97) Hamlet. Kenneth Branagh's direction and performance. Some florid directing, but he and some of the others are fine. (1/27/97) Hollow Reed. English. A custody battle for a boy between his divorced parents, a loving mother with a brutish boyfriend, and a loving father who is gay. Well written and acted. (5/5/97) Traveller. Adventures of a Southern con man. Some cleverness, some charm. Bill Paxton is very winning. (5/19/97)

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By Stanley Kauffmann

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